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BASIC SKILLS FOR RE-ENGINEERING CONFERENCE PREPARATION AND PRESENTATIONS FOR NATIONAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Academics do not only teach but they also research. Research cannot be up-taken unless there is a means of dissemination. One of the ways of research report dissemination is the conference. The academic conference is an opportunity for scholars to assemble and engage in conversations that aim at improving the practice of teaching and learning. It provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and experiences that enhance education and, by extension, human life. One of the challenges that academics face is rarely what to present at conferences, but how to present for impact. This paper justifies conference attendance and proposes strategies for the reengineering of conference presentations for national development.

Keywords*: reengineering conference, presentation, PowerPoint, academic, development*

INTRODUCTION

Basic components of engineering are theory, objectives, design and implementation. The theory is the principle behind the particular design. The objectives are the specific targets that the product is expected to serve, while implementation is the process of converting the design into a product. Therefore, reengineering often indicate a failure or inadequacy. If a product does not meet the target or is no longer in sync with extant needs, the engineers go back to the drawing board to tweak one or more things to change the product and make it more relevant to social needs and challenges.

Similarly, changes in knowledge, social needs, and technology demands changes in how things are done. Conferences have changed; the demographics of conference attendees has changed. The frequency and volume of conference attendees have changed. Even conference formats have changed. Besides, physical conferences where participants travel to a given location, there are now virtual conferences and online conferences, and even a combination of online and physical conventions. These changes demand that conferees reengineer their skills in conference preparation and presentation if they must contribute meaningfully to national change and development.

This paper is a product of a workshop facilitated by the authors on "Basic skills for conference preparation and presentation" at Federal College of Education, Obudu, Cross River State. The paper is in three parts. The first part discusses the benefits of conference attendance. The second part suggests steps for conference preparation. The final part outlines the different formats of conference presentations and zeros in on the use of the PowerPoint presentation with simple guidelines for effective presentations. The paper concludes with a call for the re-engineering of conference presentations as a means of leveraging academic contributions to national development.

Benefits of a conference

A popular Nigerian folktale relates how the birds had a conference. Of course, the birds organised the conference for birds. But Tortoise was mightily interested in attending the conference. Since it was a conference for the birds, it was

natural that the conference should be held in the sky. That would have been enough deterrence for the Tortoise. But he was not dissuaded. It was apparent that for him to attend the conference in the sky, he needed to device a means of flight. He, therefore, persuaded the Hawk to facilitate his flight by bearing him on his back. The Hawk obliged him and Tortoise achieved the impossible: an amphibious animal attended a conference in the sky! The story didn't have a happy ending anyway. But the point is that the tortoise considered a conference so important that he literally took a flight to attend. Similarly, many academic, like the Tortoise, place high premium on conference attendance and presentation because of certain advantages.

Benefits of conference attendance

A conference is a gathering of peers for the purpose of sharing knowledge and skills and engaging in conversations that enrich and deepen knowledge. It is further defined by Idiegbeyan-Ose, Ohaegbulam, and Osayande (2015) as "a formal meeting or gathering where people of like mind converge to share ideas and make policies that will be beneficial to their field of study." (p.30).They accede that a conference can be organised for people from different professions, but who share similar interests and "…converge to share ideas, present problems in their field, and proffer solutions."(p.30) Eke (2011) has tried to distinguish between a conference and a workshop by defining the former as a shorter version of the latter. However, it is common to find workshops as parts of a conference.

For the academic, seeking a justification for attending conferences seems superfluous. Thus, Ross, Hankerson, Irwin, Stone, and Higley (2007) agree that there are many reasons for attending a conference. Some of the reasons outlined by the authors range from informal to professional, from seeking to connect with friends to seeking to tap into professional knowledge.

A basic requirement for a Nigerian academic, and I believe internationally, is research. The conduct of research itself would become a mere rhetorical exercise if it adds nothing to national and human development. Therefore, research would be a total waste of time and resources if it were to be locked up in some dusty attic or hoarded away in some solitary libraries. For research to have relevance to national development, it must get to the consumer or end-user seamlessly. For that to happen, research must move from the laboratories, desktops and shelves and be out in the marketplace. It must be visible. It must be disseminated. A conference provides the veritable forum for research products to meet research products consumers.

Meet your peers.

People have many reasons for attending conferences. Some conferences are highly specialised where people of similar interests and or professions hobnob. Some could be so diverse that people of different professions and or expertise gather in the same conference. These are multidisciplinary conferences where people of different disciplines are pooled together to meet in the same venue while presenting in different fora or plenaries. However, one of the greatest benefits of attending conferences is to meet your peers and professional colleagues (Vega and Connell, 2007). Students meet with their lecturers or experts in their fields. Mentors meet with their mentees; authors meet with their readers, critics or reviewers; researchers meet with the industry; experts meet with the neophytes. These meeting often results in other benefits which will be discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Acquire More Knowledge

In a study to find out the benefits of conference attendance by librarians, Stewart (2013) found out that majority of librarians who attended conferences did that for professional development. As one meets with a diverse group of persons with multiplicity of expertise or specialisations, the inevitable result is the sharing of ideas, knowledge and skills. The conversations and narratives that occur open up opportunities for sharing of experiences. As these interactions continue, individuals gain more insight into their ongoing research, deepen their current knowledge, and learn newer skills (Otero-Iglesias, 2016). Such interactions, apart from providing answers to intriguing questions, raise questions that evoke thoughts and stimulate further inquiries and research. Moreover, Henn, Sebastian Bathelt, Harald (2014) discuss that apart from conferences facilitating knowledge transfer, they bring "together knowing communities from cross-industry, functional fields" and create …"opportunities for diverse knowledge exchanges."(p.104).

Foster Professional Connexions and collaborations

What a better place to meet members of your profession! A conference, often allows professional colleagues from a wide range of experiences and cultures to meet and network. (Hankins, Melgoza, Seeger & Wan, 2009). Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2009) also view conferences in similar lights as fora for professionals to discuss with their peers over issues of common concern. Sometimes professional collaborations are birthed at conferences. Conferences, thus, provide the platform for the interaction of persons of similar or related professions.

Gain visibility

The world has not only become a global village, as it is often said, but it has become a global, but highly competitive marketplace. For the researchers or academics to be marketable and their products/services demanded, they must have such products and services exhibited. The showcase for such exhibitions is usually the conferences. The conference, consequently becomes a forum for self-advertisement. This is especially so for the promotion in Nigerian higher institutions, where the citation frequency of one's articles could be conditions for promotion to the higher rungs of tertiary education careers. The axiom, "Publish or perish" underlines the importance of conference attendance for career progression. Some appointment and promotions committees often require conference attendance as one of the preconditions for promotion. Thus, Plunket (n.d) submits that conferences promote both the attendees' and their works.

Peer review of research work

Conference presentations are often done with and among peers. During presentations, professional colleagues have opportunity to critically appraise the presenter's work. Such critical inputs and suggestions often help to fine-tune the research, improve the design, suggest a more rigorous analytical technique, and enlarge the perspective. In addition, Ravn, and Elsborg (2011, p.1) believe that a conference should be "… a forum for learning, mutual inspiration and human flourishing".

Socializing and recreation

Conferences are serious businesses. However, they sometimes provide opportunities for socialising and recreation. Many conferences often factor tours and sightseeing into their programmes. MacGlashan, (2009) confesses preference to

conferences that allow sufficient time for sightseeing and shopping for conference related materials.

However, not everyone is so enthusiastic about conference attendance. Green (2008) argues that seeking alternative to conference attendance could "save time, energy and carbon emissions." (1466). Some have, consequently, advocated complementing conferences, with social media like tweeters. (Sopan, Rey, Butler, & Shneiderman, 2012).

CONFERENCE PREPARATION

In the following section, the steps for preparing for a conference will be outlined.

Locate a conference

A fundamental step in conference preparation is the ability to locate a conference. Some institutions have annual conferences. Students and faculty in such institutions need only to check their bulletin boards or websites regularly for calls for papers. Online search for educational conferences can yield useful and diverse results. Sometimes, information about conferences may come from lecturers to their students, or from student to student, or peer to peer by word of mouth.

Find the theme & subthemes

Some conferences have fixed themes, while others have no fixed themes. Whatever may be the case, it is important to find out what the theme and the subthemes from the conference flyer. Having identified the theme, it becomes imperative to read about the theme and subtheme to be familiar with the subject matter. Afterwards, craft a topic that aligns with the theme and subthemes. It is important, also, to be familiar with the guidelines for papers for the conference in terms of font size, referencing styles, number of pages, and general formatting specifications. Carpenter (2010) further suggests that a prospective presenters should find out what aspect(s) of their work would be of interest to the audience.

THE CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

While conference attendance is exciting and beneficial, what markets the academic is their presentations. Therefore, careful decision-making regarding the type of presentation can make a difference between a poor, drab and boring presentation and a lively, exciting and captivating presentation. Prospective conference participants should give serious consideration to the format of presentation.

The Claremont Graduate University (2016) classifies the types of paper presentations into the following:

Paper with Respondent.

Here the presentation period is shared between a presenter and a respondent. After the speakers presentation, the respondent uses half of the time used by the speaker to interrogate the presentation. Afterwards, the speaker responses to the issues raised by the respondent and summarises.

Panel Presentation.

Panels may have 3 or more speakers who discuss on a common theme or topic. There is usually a moderator who ensures the discussions and question and answer sessions are

within the stipulated time, often 60 minutes. Sessions include 3-4 speakers, each of whom talks for 15-20 minutes.

Roundtable.

As the name indicates, the discussants discuss a topical issue under the direction of a moderator. Discussants often sit round a table.

Workshops.

In workshops, the essence is to engage the participants in some activities that are preceded by a brief talk and concluded with a summary.

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POWERING CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS WITH POWERPOINT.

A popular means of conference presentation is the PowerPoint. As Kristy Hedges (2014) has pointed out in her blog post, "Six Ways to Avoid Death by PowerPoint," a PowerPoint is always present in every presentation. The ubiquity of the PowerPoint is probably due to its many advantages. It is able to capture and sustain attention. It is versatile since it can feature multimedia. It can move from text to sound, pictures and even videos. When well prepared, it can be engaging and captivating. It has a way of drawing attention to the key ideas. Good PowerPoint presentations convey information clearly and interestingly. They are easy to follow and remember. For the presenter, it saves a lot of energy compared to reading a paper. It is often inclusive because of its multimedia capacity. Thus, even participants with visual challenges can listen to the audio, while those with auditory challenges could benefit from the visuals.

However, a poorly designed PowerPoint presentation can impede rather enhance communication. It can kill the audience with boredom or irritation. As Salmond and Smith (2011) have suggested, "Our main suggestions are that political scientists should use fewer and simpler slides, and that those slides should contain visually rich information that illustrates a speaker's point without distracting the audience from his or her words." (p. 589). Although the authors addressed political scientists, their counsel applies to other presenters irrespective of their discipline. It is important that visual aids serve as aids and not as distractors. Consequently, the following guidelines on PowerPoint presentations design are offered.

1. *Choosing the design.*

There are many default PowerPoint designs/templates offline. However, experts believe that since millions of people have seen such designs already, they have, thus, lost their allure and charm. For instance, Garr Reynolds cautions against the use of Microsoft templates. But there are thousands of designs/templates online. Some are free to download, while some are downloadable with a fee. With a little ingenuity, however, you can create your own templates and slide designs. Such slides may not look too great, but their freshness could be their selling point. For professional presentations, a consistent design is advisable.

The use of suitable contrasts is a great visual aid. Certain colour are natural contrasts and complements. Black and blue backgrounds often contrast well and are eye-friendly.

2. *Managing the content*

Often students simply upload their projects or their Word document on PowerPoint. This defeats the whole purpose of the PowerPoint, which is to highlight key *points. Cluttering* the slide with text is simply a nuisance and a terrible disaster to a presentation. Consider the slides below:
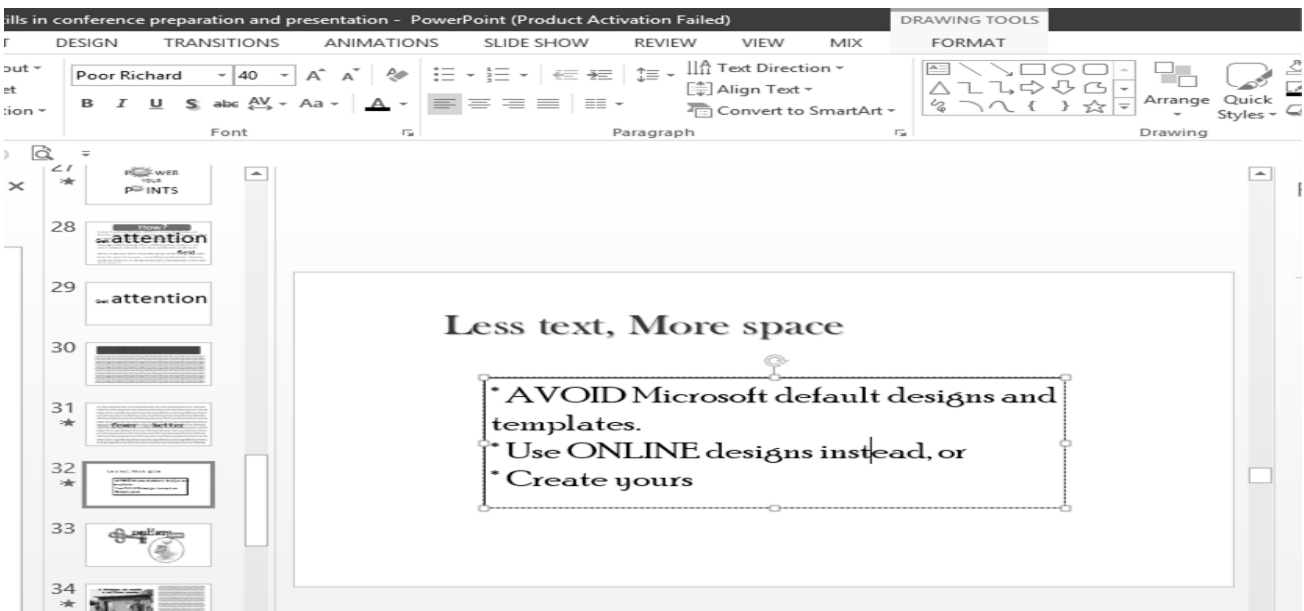
Fig.1. High density slide cluttered with text

Fig. 2. A less cluttered slide with fewer text

Evidently, the less text you use, the more prominence you give to your key information, and the more impact the slide has.

Another important consideration with text is the font type and size. In as much as some authors have cautioned against the use of the common default font types like Calibri and Times New Roman, the guiding principle should be visibility, clarity and comfort. This author usually set his font size between 32 and 60.
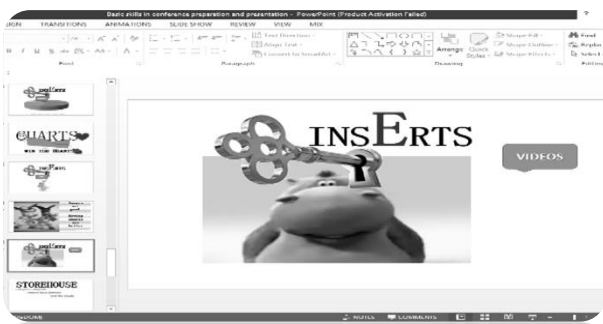
Often, it is necessary to complement the text with

Fig.3.Inserts: pictures and video

pictures. You may download pictures online. Some are in the public domain, meaning that they are free to download and use. Alternatively, you can take pictures with your phone, upload on to your computer and then insert in

the slide. Videos can also be inserted into the slide. Where figures are required, or some form of statistical information is to be conveyed, a simple graph or chart can win the hearts of your audience. A picture or a chart is worth a million words.

Animations can enliven the presentation. Unfortunately, they can also be distracting. Text animation should be kept to the barest minimum, if at all. For emphasis, a zoom-in can be very effective. A scrolling text at the bottom can be useful too. Watching how text is used on the television broadcasts can be very illuminating.

Finally, the slide should be checked for spelling and grammatical accuracy. Sloppy editing could leave a lasting memory of the error rather than of the presentation.

THE ACTUAL PRESENTATION.

Now, face to face with your audience is the time to tell your story. This is when you sell your product. The presenter is the key, not the slides. The audience need to focus on the presenter more than the presentation. This is because the presenter presents more oral information than is on the slides. Therefore if the presentation focuses more on the slides than on the presenter, vital information may be missed or glossed over. Yet, there must be a balance, the appearance and speech mannerism of the presenter should not also be a hindrance to effective communication. Mollerup (2011) laments that "Slide presentations, often called PowerPoint presentations, have a bad reputation accumulated by countless mediocre presentations." The author attributes this state of affairs to the fact that:

> *Most presenters give presentations that don't cash in on the didactic potential of the bimedial format (speech + visuals). They give presentations where the visual part is not coordinated with the spoken part, in fact where the visual part is directly counterproductive to the spoken part. As a result, they don't present themselves and their subject to their best. (p.4).*

This underlines the importance of the acquisition of skills in conference preparation and presentation through reading and watching the maestros during their presentations.

The presenter should bear in mind that the presentation is a story. Therefore, the pace of delivery should be moderate and varied to align with the slides and points of emphasis. Reading from the slides is not advisable. As such, it is expedient to face the audience rather than the slides. The use of a remote control gives the speakers some advantages and control. They can skip slides or return to a previous slide.

Youngworth (2009) suggests that the presenters should take cognisance of their personality types, as their personalities could affect their delivery style. The author distinguishes between the introvert

presenter and the extrovert presenter. Whereas, the extrovert "uses inflexion, modestly organised, impromptu, and tangential," the introvert uses even voice, is "methodical, extremely organised, and stays on course" (p.33).

Lastly, the presenters should anticipate and encourage questions and comments. Questions are useful for clarification or restatement of salient points. They can also, point the presenters to areas and concepts they may have overlooked but which could enrich their enquiries. There is no crime in acknowledging ignorance. Pretending knowledge where there is none or at best vague knowledge can be disastrous if there are experts in attendance. Besides, ignorance is an opportunity for learning.

CONCLUSION

Students and academics are usually required to attend conferences either to present papers, posters or panels, or to gain knowledge and meet experts in their fields. Whatever may be the motivation for attending conferences, attendance has many benefits ranging from recreational to professional.

Often, conference attendees have presentations to make. A presentation is analogous to a marketable product. Therefore, the presenter is a form of a marketer. The packaging of the product and the manner with which it is presented to the consumers can either kill the product or turn it into a bestseller.

PowerPoints usually feature prominently in conference presentations. They serve as tools for enhancing the presentation and conveying information pleasantly and engagingly. The design, content and mode of presentation is critical in making a lasting impression and selling the product. Therefore, students and faculty should acquire basic skills to reengineer their presentations for change and national development.

Finally, since presenters improve with experience, it is assumed that the more opportunities, students and faculty have to attend and present at conferences, they better they are likely to become. However, we wish to conclude with the words of an American football coach, Vince Lombardi (1908 -1970), as cited by Youngworth (2009): "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect."

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